

I recognize that smell.

It's foul and overwhelming. It's vile and rotten. It's awful, and I think I may know what it is.

My eyes suddenly open, as if they were unshackled from an invisible chain. My vision comes to me instantly. The first thing that seeps into my retinas were piles and piles of flesh. They surround me in a world of darkness. There is no sky. There is no ground I can see. There is no speck of light anywhere. I step forward without thinking.

The sound of water hits my ears. Ripples form around my legs as I look down at my feet. The water is strange. It's red. No, it's not blood. At least it doesn't sound like it. Wouldn't it coagulate as I walk? I swear, it's water.

My legs start to move. I don't know where, but it's forward. For some time, there's nothing up ahead, but now it comes back to me. Memories pour back, stopping me in my tracks. My head doesn't hurt but it feels like the world is spinning. As quickly as it began, the sensation stops. I let go of my head and look up. A door has spawned in front of me somehow.

And suddenly, the questions spew out. What happened to the world? What happened to the dragons? And what happened to me? Where am I? My legs instinctively move themselves forward. Behind that door must be the answers! I reach for it, and my hands push it lightly. Ignoring the intricate designs, I must find my answers! I need to know what happened!

As soon as I push on the door, the darkness melts into a blinding white. The water below me evaporates. It's just me now. A sound booms from nowhere.

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What? The sound I hear is unlike a voice or howl or roar I've ever heard. Is it even coming from something living?

I open my mouth to answer, but not a sound comes out. Where my eyes stare, something forms. I can't tell if it's a creature or a person. I realize that I simply can't understand it. My eyes won't process its form. In fact, I think I feel my vision burning away the long I stare. To recover, I close them and turn my head away. I cover my ears to block its noise.

But it won't go away.

It's talking to me. It's looking at me. It's not letting me escape.

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With every sentence, the voice speaks louder. With every word, it shakes my entire being. With every breath in between, it's like every single cell in my body is pulling apart from the others. With every moment of silence, it's like my body is reduced to nothing, like I can't feel anything.

Finally, I feel things stabilize. I open an eye to peek at my surroundings. Once I sense that it's gone, I both them both. They dart around, allowing me to scan the room I'm in. It looks and feels like I'm in a normal room. I come to a realization that I'm in a normal chair, sitting at a normal table. Probably looking normal.

But that's impossible. I know for a fact that I destroyed the world. This room must be a hallucination by that thing. I know this is a trap.

I look down to my hands. They feel normal. I touch my face. It feels normal. My hair is normal. My clothes are normal. My head is normal.

That in itself is not normal.

I glance up across the table. There's someone sitting across from me. They're watching me with a soft but menacing look on their face. Horns protrude out of their head. The sclera in their eyes are different than the other — one black, the other white. Their figure is quite feminine as they wear an elegant dress, befitting a noble. Long brown hair flows beautifully down their back, with some strands flowing to their front. The hands on the table lie calmly with one on top of the other.

"You're awake." The woman's voice sounds just as regal as she looks. Thankfully, her words are ones that I can understand.

"Who are you?"

"The Norn has sent you to me. You, who destroyed what I built, why?"

I stare at her blankly. Is she my enemy? "Are you God? Are you the God who made the world?" Maybe now, I shall finally have my answers.

“Such is a title that I do not answer to. Though, you refer to me correctly as the one who molded this world. I ask again, perhaps in a way you will understand better. Why did you destroy what was not yours?”

Without a thought or a beat, words spill from my mouth. “Your world was one filled with strife and madness. Gates of the Damned were everywhere, not just in my part of the world. Why? Why did it fall on our shoulders to keep them sealed?” With each question, I just couldn’t stop. One after the other, I couldn’t stop. My volume rose. my emotions became tense. I couldn’t breathe until I finally let out all the cries my body stored long ago.

I scream and wail until my throat can no longer. I cough and spit out all the saliva from my mouth. Only when I hear her answer is when my body stops, as if she was turning a faucet off in me. I look up. My vision may be blurry, but I can clearly see her looking right at me.

“Maiden of Sin, you were a cornered rat. You are talented but devious. You tamed Dragons to turn against me and sacrificed them to get to where you are now. Tell me, do you realize where you are now?”

I try to speak out, but my mouth doesn’t open. I don’t even know what I was going to say. All I can do is sit there in silence and listen.

“Welcome to my domain, little champion. Perhaps, I will let you witness the rebirth of my new world.” She stands up, putting her hands on the table. Her menacing gaze stabs me with daggers. “Is Godhood what you sought for, little rat?”

“No!” I finally speak again. I clear my throat. “All I wish is a world without suffering. If Godhood is what it takes to do so, then make me a God!” I try to match her stare with a menacing look of my own. I can’t lose here. I just want to live in peace.

But deep inside, there’s something strange. I feel like there's something I don't know. The longer we stare at each other, the more it feels like I’m in the dark. The woman finally straightens her posture. With her back straightened, I see now that she’s taller than I thought. She’s literally looking down at me now.

“Small little maiden, perhaps there is merit to your existence in my domain. Your presence here means that you can ascend to something... inhuman. Perhaps you will aid me in the rebirth of the new world.

The tense air subsides a bit. I feel my shoulders slightly fall. “You’re asking me for help?”

“As the first human ascended being, I’ve decided that you will be entitled to all the information you need and want. The Gates of the Damned were a creation of mine to protect humanity. Your kind is complex and unpredictable, perfect for satisfying the Norn. Though you all need to be protected from yourselves. Even from the first worlds, I’ve noticed something. The nature of humans will always poison the world. No matter how clean its slate is, there’s always a stain. I believe your kind called it Miasma.”

“Yes, the awful gas that turns people into monsters. I’m aware. I’ve read the texts on what the Gates kept sealed.”

“Good, your memory is in tact. There is unfortunately no way to change human nature. The makeup of your code cannot simply be rewritten. Fate will always find a way to fix it. Tell me, Ascended One. Do you believe in destiny?”

Before I could even get a breath out, the lights go out. Everything becomes dark. There’s nothing in front, behind, or around me to see. I reach out in front of me. The table is gone. I stand up and turn around. The chair is gone as well.

“Hush, it appears that we have ran out of time. Let me work now, and you can slumber until then.”

“Wait!” I yell into the void. Without thinking, I start to run. I have to find something else, anything else!

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“Worry not, you and the Old Primordial Ones will awaken in a world unlike what you’ve known. I will see to it that it will be a world of your liking. In return, see to it that you understand your role. Else, you will be forced to understand.”

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